

Where Did Education in Texas Go Wrong? A Qualitative Analysis of How Standardized Testing
Affects the Quality of Primary Education

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I have adhered to University policy regarding academic honesty in completing this assignment.

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Abstract

Education reform, like No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act, introduced an intensified accountability system in which students, teachers, and schools are evaluated by standardized test scores. For Texas, in particular, the state assessment carries a great deal of weight in measuring accountability. As a result, schools are inundated with blame, pressure, and isolated responsibility in maintaining high test scores to secure adequate funding. In order to understand the source of challenges Texas education faces today, I conducted a qualitative analysis in the form of interviews. The data collected from the interviews revealed three key areas from which Texas education struggles stem from: accountability, assessment, and collaboration. The paper concludes with a few recommendations developed from the analysis such as: base accountability on teacher and student growth; use interim state assessments to track students' progression; increase cross-industry collaboration.

Key Words: STAAR test, Texas education, accountability, assessment, standardized testing, No Child Left Behind, Every Student Succeeds Act, education reform, federal education reform, growth, collaboration

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The evolution of standardized testing into “high stake testing” through the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act created a new process of accountability and evaluation of public education with the intention to incentivize teachers and school administrations to effectively and efficiently teach. However, this process of accountability remains controversial in whether or not it has benefited the education system and most importantly the students. Before nation-wide education mandates such as, No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act, standardized tests were used as an evaluation measure of a student’s progression and understanding, but with increased federal involvement came a new accountability system that tethered funding to test scores. With federal money hanging over their heads, school districts are forced to prioritize test preparation to produce high test scores. In Texas, this test has had many forms that have led up to the current STAAR test. The problem does not lie in the intentions nor the idea of standardized tests but rather in the implementation and consequences of standardized tests. Ultimately, federal education reform and mandated standardized testing has greatly affected teachers, students, and the classroom. Ironically, No Child Left Behind has created a system that continually leaves children behind by emphasizing test scores rather than confronting fundamental issues of inequity in education that are perpetuated by this very system because it fails to address poor school funding, lack of support for teachers, students’ best interest, and unequal opportunities for post-secondary success. While accountability in the classroom is important, it is also important to review how other major players in education who reside outside of the classroom (e.g. parents, local representatives, boards of education, independent school district administration, and state representatives) are held accountable. Overall, this thesis will explore the intentions of No Child

Left Behind as well as its implications on curricula, standards, and testing, analyze the history of standardized testing, how it has become the source of accountability and determine if these tests, specifically the STAAR test, accurately evaluates students' level of understanding in specific subjects and preparedness for college or a career after graduation. From the archival research, this thesis has exposed various questions surrounding accountability, testing, curricula, national standards, funding, government intervention, teacher retention, parent-teacher-student relationships, and alternative-learning which are used to guide the research and interviews as well as the proposed solutions in the conclusion.

Literature Review

Standardized Testing History

The year 1913 marked a progressive education era in which the social efficiency movement began. The idea of social efficiency was dependent on scientific measurements, which for education, translated into test scores. One advocate of the social efficiency movement, Joseph Mayer Rice, argued that test results could offer a precise measurement for rating teacher's effectiveness. Mark Groen, an education scholar, argued that in this moment of change, testing would no longer just demonstrate mastery of content but instead would measure effectiveness of teachers' instruction as well as the overall efficiency of the school (2012, p.3). This movement was accompanied by the idea of tracking and sorting students to fulfill certain roles within society. In fact, many advocates during the social efficiency movement, "argued that tax-supported public schools should prepare students for 'life' rather than attempting to prepare all students for college" (2012, p.3). As a result, students engaged in schooling known as comprehensive education in which all students were educated either through the vocational track, general track, or college preparatory track. Groen (2012) argued that the social efficiency

movement set the foundation for reforms, like No Child Left Behind, that prioritized test scores as the source of accountability. Most of the early pushes for standardized testing were in pursuit of, “bringing order to chaotic schools,” by offering national standards and guidelines for schools to abide by in order to provide effective schooling (TEA, n.d.). In her dissertation, Jenna Litcher (2017), described how the early 19th-century provided a roadmap for the American public education system in which education was viewed as a necessary unifier for the nation while also setting the standard for open and accessible education for all people (p.2). However, this roadmap also positioned the federal government as a key player in education and set the foundation for major federal education reforms.

With the emergence of international competition, schools became the way to advance the United States as a world-power because America had to be able to compete on a global level (Litcher, 2017, p.4). Globalization acted as a catalyst for education reform in the U.S. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was passed to increase federal involvement in education through the use of federal funding and mandates tied to funding (2012, p.1). Federal involvement in education was originally intended to be a “war on poverty” that would fund school libraries, state departments of education, education research, bi-lingual education, and students with disabilities (Litcher, 2017, p.7). The ESEA was just the beginning of educational reform and federal involvement in educational accountability. During Ronald Reagan’s presidency, there was an assessment of public education conducted by the National Commission on Excellence in Education known as, *A Nation at Risk: An Imperative for Educational Reform*. *A Nation at Risk* “represented a turning point in the public’s view of education by creating doubt in public minds regarding the quality and competitiveness of education in America” (Litcher, 2017, p.15). In other words, Americans were threatened by mediocrity due to the perceived risk

of falling behind other world powers and losing jobs and economic prosperity to other countries. Education was viewed as a national unifier and ultimately as a necessity for America to continue as a world power. The assessment focused on “indicators of risk” shown through literacy and academic achievement. The study revealed that schools in America were failing, and it found a decline in test scores and academic achievement as the cause.

From this finding, members of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, outlined content, standards and expectations, time, teaching, and leadership and fiscal support to combat educational failures (Litcher, 2017, p.15). Each subsection listed by the Commission included strategies for how schools could achieve the goals outlined by *A Nation at Risk*. The content section set the core basics for education as English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. The standards, created in relation to the core subjects, raised the bar of achievement for students to proficiency and required more rigor in instruction. Schools were also expected to include more rigorous materials and relevant applications of technology. The time portion suggested that schools spend more instructional time focused on the core subjects as well as an extended school day and school year, more homework, improved classroom management, and stricter regulations for absenteeism. In the section on teaching, the report suggested that teaching salaries be increased; however, the salaries would be performance based. Additionally, it called for better professional development of teachers. Lastly, the leadership and fiscal support section focused on the financing of schools in which school board members, governors, and legislators “have the primary responsibility for financing and governing schools” (Litcher, 2017, p.19-21).

The federal role in education is now continually protected and occasionally updated through new national mandates. In fact, the federal government seems to be a serious stakeholder in the education system, particularly when it involves the economic success of the country.

Federal involvement began when the country determined it was economically disadvantaged on the global scale. Now, it seems as though the federal government enacts the most activity in education during an economic downturn in the U.S. Litcher (2017) quotes the Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell, discussing the importance of protecting the federal role in education by exposing the critical condition of education to ensure the public belief that federal involvement is always necessary (p.23). When the ESEA was introduced, it was initially to confront “the education of disadvantaged children, children of low-income families, children of migratory agricultural workers, handicapped, neglected and delinquent children” (2012, p.4). *A Nation at Risk* was then written to define the crisis in U.S. education in efforts to convince the public it needed federal involvement in schools; however, even with new government reform in pursuit of a more equitable education system, this crisis still continues. Pedro Noguera (2003), professor and author of *City schools and the American Dream*, argues that the crisis in education still continues to this day, but it is mainly associated with “urban” public schools. Just like Bell described earlier, Noguera (2003) points out that the diagnoses of the state of education in the U.S. is neither genuine nor does it offer real solutions, but instead the diagnoses are used to influence “popular conceptions of urban schools, and... influence how policy makers approach the task of ‘fixing’ the schools” (p.4). Although crises typically demand urgency, as seen over the last few decades of education reform, the federal government sees no dire need to confront the deep-rooted problems within the education system. Instead, the federal government depends on the crisis to remain involved in education and therefore in control of the classroom.

During the Bill Clinton administration, the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994 was passed to reauthorize the ESEA alongside a few new provisions. With the goal to “close the gaps,” the IASA increased federal money allocated to disadvantaged students to ensure equitable

educational opportunities. Additionally, it demanded schools provide more rigorous end-of-year assessments to measure yearly progress, specifically in math, reading, and language arts. The IASA also prioritized teacher professional development by outlining strategies by which education agencies and teacher programs could improve the quality of teacher preparation, particularly related to diversity. Although the IASA was ambitious in its efforts to better the educational opportunities for disadvantaged students, it went unremarked by most and was quickly surpassed by NCLB in the early 2000s.

After IASA, No Child Left Behind was presented as a reevaluation of the ESEA with the goal to close the achievement gaps by prioritizing accountability, flexibility and choice to ensure no child was left behind (Litcher, 2017, p.62). NCLB was a bipartisan federal education plan under the Bush administration in 2002. It was an accountability system that held teachers, students, and districts accountable for student performance on state assessments. Although previous education reform contributed to the accountability system, NCLB accelerated accountability by requiring each campus and district to receive a rating, “based on the percentage of all student(s) and the four student groups (white, Hispanic, African American and economically disadvantaged) that pass the state’s assessment tests at grades 3-11” (TEA, n.d.). Scholars, Thomas Dee and Brian Jacob (2010) described NCLB as a policy response to the agency problem of no accountability among teachers and school administrators (p.152). There was a common belief that a focus on test results would incentivize students, teachers, and schools to make the necessary behavioral changes to benefit the quality of education. However, this same belief raised concern on what behaviors teachers would adopt due to the high stakes they faced with a system that graded them based upon how well their students did on a state administered test. In other words, Dee and Jacob (2010) pointed out how teachers may rely on a

“teaching to the test” mentality which is accompanied with the risk of focusing on “narrow cognitive skills targeted by their high-stakes state assessment at the expense of broader and more genuine improvement in cognitive achievement” (p.152).

NCLB had many mandates for each state to follow in order to receive grant monies. Each state was required to create a strategy for implementing the provisions of NCLB, specifically regarding accountability, standards, and assessments. By 2002, Texas had already created its own standardized test known as the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) test, but up until NCLB, the purpose of the assessment was to measure student performance. After NCLB, the assessment became a factor in accountability that determined the funding Texas school districts would receive from the federal government. A major aspect of NCLB was the Adequate Yearly Progress, AYP, requirement by which “each state and school district were measured to determine [if] student achievement had improved enough, and whether the state and school would receive sanctions or rewards for progress or lack thereof” (Litcher, 2017, p. 64-5). The AYP outlined in detail each of the factors states should use in assessing yearly progress; the most influential being the requirements to use assessments as the main measurements and to provide improvement objectives for specific groups of students (e.g. economically disadvantaged, students who are a part of major racial and ethnic groups, special education population, and English Language Learner). Overall, NCLB presented a new system to measure academic standards and accountability by providing strict mandates for states to implement in their effort to confront the inequities in education.

No Child Left Behind Implications

With its many mandates, NCLB had many implications on the education system in the U.S. One of the major implications was how it altered pedagogy. Due to the emphasis of

Mathematics and English Language Arts as the tested subjects used for accountability, David Hursh (2007), an education professor and scholar, argued that “schools are likely to reduce or eliminate subjects that are not being tested, including the arts and sciences” (p.507). Whereas in the 19th-century music and art programs were mandatory courses, in the 20th-century, NCLB reduced these courses to mere electives that are often under-funded or cut. Groen (2012) referenced a national study, conducted by the Center of Educational Policy, that analyzed 349 school districts in 2007 and found that five years after NCLB was implemented, school districts not only increased the instructional time dedicated to Math and Language Arts, but they also changed the curriculum to encompass specific content and skills that would be covered by the state assessment (p.7). In fact, according to Hursh (2007), an emphasis on test preparation caused schools to dedicate a majority of their curriculum budget to test prep resources.

A famous philosopher, Paulo Freire (1981), warned educators of the consequences that came along with limited and controlled pedagogy. He coined the *banking model* of education by which teachers are the depositors responsible for depositing information into their students, the recipients who are responsible for receiving, memorizing, and repeating said information (Freire, 1981, p.63). The passive learning emphasized by the banking model focuses on what Daniella Dennis (2016), an education scholar, calls “constrained skills” because students are “being taught and tested on isolated skills at the expense of opportunities for meaningful engagement with text” (p.396). The introduction of mandated curriculum, high-stakes tests, and an unforgiving accountability system, devalued teachers as critical thinkers and intellectuals to just a vessel used for transporting information. Henry Giroux (1985), scholar and cultural critic, exposed how NCLB used “the standardization of school knowledge in the interest of managing and controlling it” rather than granting school districts autonomy in the classroom (p.191). The standardization

of knowledge created a shift in teacher training that now heavily relies on management pedagogies. NCLB operated on the assumption that teachers needed to be managed in order to maintain consistent and predictable teaching across different school districts and student populations (1985, p.193). According to Dennis (2016), “teachers were largely stripped of their autonomy and professional identity” through scripted curriculum and limited resources (p.395). As a result, prospective teachers were often evaluated based on their ability to manage their classroom, control the learning process, and equip their students with the basic knowledge necessary to maintain high test scores and high accountability ratings for the teacher.

Additionally, NCLB created a system of accountability within education that relies on test scores to determine whether or not a school is up to par. Within this accountability system, teachers are often the individuals placed on the chopping block when it comes to poor test scores. NCLB implied that teachers had “not rigorously enforced standards or accurately assessed students,” so intervention in the classroom was necessary (2007, p.500). Since teachers were deemed inadequate, reforms like NCLB set a new standard for teachers to behave as “specialized technicians... whose function then becomes one of managing and implementing curricula” (1985, p.190). However, accountability does not only aim to control teachers and the classroom, but it also intends to set expectations and standards for students. Litcher (2017) summarized a few of the NCLB objectives, and among these, was a specific set of criteria for how states should set expectations for each subgroup of students. States were obligated to determine “minimum percentages of students who [were] required to meet or exceed the proficient level on the academic assessments” within each separate group of students (2017, p.66).

In the case of Texas schools, the Texas Education Agency set targets for each student group in order to measure the differentials in achievement to determine the Closing the Gaps domain. Students are divided by race/ethnic groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, special populations, and each group is assigned an expected percentage of students who must reach academic achievement on state assessments. For Texas Academic Achievement Status in ELA/Reading, the percentages are listed as: all students 44%, African American 32%, Hispanic 37%, White 60%, American Indian 43%, Asian 74%, Pacific Islander 45%, two or more races 56%, economically disadvantaged 33%, English Learner (EL) 29%, Special Education 36%. These percentages remain consistent across the state of Texas and are measured for both ELA/Reading and Math. While the intentions behind “closing the gaps” may be good, these expected percentages demanded by NCLB often reinforced and incentivized teachers to focus almost exclusively on students who passed or were close to passing the assessments in order to reach the minimum percentage required by the state. Hursh (2007) referenced a teacher claiming administrators encouraged them to focus their efforts on “raising test scores of those students who are closest to passing the standardized tests” (p.506). Students deemed savable are viewed as “valued commodities” because ‘passing’ scores points in accountability based on assessments and growth.

There is an underlying goal with NCLB, to privatize education through the private sector. Hursh (2007) points out that state assessments and accountability are strategically used to show public schools as failing and options for privatization as a solution. Types of privatization come in the form of vouchers and charter schools as a means “to convert the educational system into markets” (2007, p.501). NCLB uses the AYP measurements to determine which schools need corrective action. In other words, under-performing schools would require special interventions

typically from the private sector (2012, p.6). School's faced consequences such as, loss of funding, new curriculum, turnover among superintendents, principals and teachers, restructuring, or push for 'choice' among students and parents (2017, p.68). Many privatization advocates believe the solution to ineffective schooling is private intervention in the form of charter schools. However, under NCLB forced intervention disproportionately affects urban schools with high populations of low-income students. Noguera (2003) emphasizes the connection between poverty and the quality of schools due to a decimated tax base within a community with low household income and reliance on welfare (p.18). Urban schools are not only set up to fail the yearly progress measures demanded by NCLB, but they are also plagued by the low expectations of the state. Instead of confronting the issue of under-funding, low expectations, high turnover, and poor community support, reforms like NCLB consider low performing urban schools as inevitable and hopeless. Therefore, the only proposed solution NCLB advocates pushed for, was to expose low-performing schools, blame the district and its teachers for the low performance, report the unsatisfactory AYP data to the public, gain public support for government intervention, all with the goal to convert public schools into charter or magnet schools. Good, bad, or indifferent, this is the underlying cycle of NCLB and neoliberal reform.

End of NCLB

NCLB claimed to promote individualism and choice within education, ideals most notable by neoliberal advocates. The shift to neoliberal education caused a shift to individualism and as a consequence, a shift from social responsibility to individual responsibility, particularly in pedagogy, due to the pressure placed on teachers to behave in isolation. Teachers are isolated from other teachers, administration, their classroom and students as well as the curriculum and standards they are mandated to impose. Deborah Britzman (1986), a professor and practicing

psychoanalyst, argued that NCLB strategically created an accountability system that isolated the teacher in efforts of cornering teachers in implementing social control tactics in order to instill necessary knowledge students needed to be considered successful within the system (p.140).

Instead of promoting critical thinking, teachers are encouraged to teach the “right way” of thinking that was pre-determined by those in power. Additionally, teachers who are isolated from their students often rely on inauthentic understandings of their students and learning.

Management pedagogy, confronted by Giroux (1988), ignores, “students [that] come from different histories and embody different experiences, linguistic practices, cultures and talents” (p.109). Therefore, the learning objectives blindly reflect biased and dominant understandings, imposed through federal and state mandates, that go unchallenged in the classroom under the excuse of “preparing the students for the end of the year assessments.” Any culturally relevant, critical, or adaptive teaching is neglected due to the pressure to raise test scores and to teach the skills and knowledge tested by standardized assessments (2007, p.92). NCLB used test scores to grade schools on effectiveness despite the exclusion of culture, creativity, and critical thinking. Noguera (2003) remarks education reform, like NCLB, as “unaccountable to those it serves” because it perpetuates an uncommon system by which the quality of service within public education “has no bearing whatsoever on the ability of the system to function” (p.15).

Beginning of Common Core

During the President Barack Obama Administration, in 2009, the Race to the Top (RTT) was introduced to spark public school reform in states through competitive grant money. RTT aimed to provide monetary incentives for states to improve “the lowest performing schools and developing effective teachers and leaders” (Scott, 2013 as cited in Litcher, 2017, p.79). There was a strategic trade-off: states were granted more power in education and the federal

government ensured state education policies were up to par with federal guidelines. The state department of education was responsible for drafting a plan that defined how the state was going to adopt necessary standards and assessments, track data to measure growth, reward and retain effective teachers, and turn around the low-performing schools in the state (2017, p.80).

According to Emily Liebttag (2013), an education scholar, in 2010, Common Core State Standards were developed, based on top performing countries and current rigorous standards, to offer states “clear academic benchmarks with more concise academic standards for essential learning that [would] prepare students to be college and career ready” (p.57). Common Core was established with a goal to ensure equity in education by providing consistent expectations for students across the nation. CCSS were highly remarked by supporters because the measures were said to prepare students for college or career, grant students a competitive advantage internationally, ensure equity within education, provide clarity with standards, and encourage collaboration cross-sector. RTT is connected to Common Core because it is used to incentivize states to engage with federal education standards.

Under NCLB, “students across the nation were being taught different standards, but... were expected to make the same achievement regardless of possible inhibiting factors” (Liebttag, 2013, p.59). Common Core was created to provide students common standards, curriculum, and expectations regardless of the student’s background or identities. However, both NCLB and CCSS are education reforms inspired by neoliberal ideals; therefore, although slightly different, Michael Dumas, an education professor, argued that both reforms consider education as a market that “knows neither race nor racism” (p.534). Dumas (2013) refers to reforms like NCLB and CCSS as “antiracism” reforms with intent to integrate without confronting or challenging the system at play. Common standards are an attempt at challenging the inequities within the

education system by creating a common language to produce equal access and opportunity; however, the framework for common standards did not account for equitable implementation. Liebttag (2013) argued that variability in how states train teachers and the materials chosen for use in the classroom is inevitable (p.60). Even so, it is important to note that standard implementation would not necessarily equate with an equitable education. In fact, standard implementation poses a threat to the autonomy and capability of a teacher. On the other hand, Common Core, compared to NCLB, claims to provide teachers with more flexibility in how they meet the overarching goals because it "...provides teachers with opportunities to incorporate students' cultures, backgrounds, and ideas of respect and understanding into lessons" (Liebttag, 2013, p. 62). Furthermore, CCSS attempts to restore the trust between administrators and teachers by empowering teachers to design curriculum and make instructional decisions for their classroom.

Despite the intentions behind CCSS, the equity piece remains untouched. Liebttag (2013) suggested that centralized integration of equity in teacher training may be counterproductive, but she highlights the need for equity, cultural relevance, and diversity training for teachers. Although CCSS confronts both equity and high-quality schooling, as stressed by Freire (1981), it fails to change the fundamental challenges of the education system. In other words, equity training is often limited to that of salvation practices targeted towards specific minority groups. Dumas (2013) points out that neoliberal reform may still be "attentive to racial difference and recognizes inequitable outcomes but explains these differences as essentially not about race or (in)justice, but individual and group choices" (p.534). As a result, CCSS forces individuals to participate in the "market" that is the education system through integration and assimilation, but if that individual fails to succeed within the set standards, they are to blame for their failure. To

conclude, CCSS may strive towards equity in education, but its neoliberal values cause it to avoid changing the system by creating a faux-antiracist system in which all individuals have equal opportunity to succeed.

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act superseded No Child Left Behind. Its goal was to embrace “comprehensive literacy instruction” and continuous professional development of teachers (2016, p.396). Additionally, the new reform encourages autonomy in the classroom and places more emphasis on effective literacy teaching. Dennis (2016) mentioned eight practices, synthesized by Cunningham and Allington (2015), that support student’s development: balance comprehensive instruction, focus on reading and writing, integrate science and social studies with reading and writing, emphasize higher order thinking, teach explicit reading and writing skills, use a variety of resources, provide a variety in teaching, maintain good management and high expectations (p.397). Additionally, ESSA decreased the level of emphasis on state assessment results, while maintaining test scores as one of the many factors for accountability. Instead, the goal was to use “formative assessments to make instructional decisions,” in other words, use data to assess children’s development and provide tailored instruction to that child (2016, p.398). ESSA aimed to prioritize the Closing Gaps Domain which measures a school’s ability to close gaps in education inequalities through academic achievement and growth, English Language Learner proficiency, student achievement domain scores, graduation rate, and college, career, or military readiness. Then, ESSA uses evidence-based interventions to ensure the practices, strategies, or programs implemented have definitive evidence to show they are effective in producing results.

Texas Education under ESSA

Whereas Common Core has been adopted by 44 states, Texas has continued to operate using its own standards and assessments while still complying with ESSA. Texas has typically maintained a strong belief in the state's power over most things in the public sphere, including education. In fact, Texas has largely operated almost totally independent of national ties, with its own set of standards, curriculum, educational programs, textbooks, test prep materials, and assessments. However, in order to benefit from federal funding, Texas must comply with federal education mandates outlined by the ESSA. While Texas is able to create and maintain educational standards through the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) instead of adopting Common Core, it is still obligated to fulfill the national requirements to assess effectiveness. In 2019, the TEA created a new strategic plan in alignment to ESSA by focusing on four priorities, "1) to recruit, support, and retain teachers and principals 2) to build a foundation of reading and math 3) to connect high school to career and college 4) to improve low performing schools" (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, p.5). This strategic plan also includes Texas' long-term goals for education. The state's 60x30 plan outlines that by the year 2030, 60 percent of Texans, ages 25-30, should possess some form of post-secondary credential (e.g. trade school, community college, four-year university). In order to reach this goal, Texas has set its Student Achievement domain to 60 percent. Additionally, Texas relies on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR), to measure student performance and college readiness. According to the TEA, the STAAR test "was built and validated by actual student performance so that achieving the Meets Grade Level standard is indicative of a student who... has a better than 60 percent chance of passing freshman college level math and English courses" (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, p.15). Therefore, Texas has the overarching goal of increasing student proficiency and closing the gaps of academic achievement. As of the 2017-

2018 school year, Texas began to implement interim assessments to allow schools to plan short-term and long-term intervention strategies in order to confront large academic gaps within each student group. Although ESSA encourages states to primarily use standardized tests as formative assessments to guide classroom instruction, the Texas state assessment remains as a large indicator of student performance and accountability within schools.

Questions

The archival research provided a deeper understanding and knowledge of the history, motives and implications of standardized tests and education reforms and the effects of both on Texas education. However, this research generated several questions that required direct answers. The main questions that influenced the analysis included:

1. How has the STAAR test directly impacted the classroom and students?
2. How has federal education reform, specifically NCLB and ESSA, affected education nationally and in Texas?
3. Where do the problems within education in Texas stem?
4. What would be an accurate and well-rounded evaluation of teachers, principals, and schools?
5. What changes should be made to improve Texas education?

Method

Past research has focused on the effects and implications of common standards and standardized testing; however, there is limited knowledge on why Texas education behaves the way it does and who is behind the scenes conducting this behavior. Although the archival research focused on the history of education reform and standardized testing, the analysis concentrated on education in Texas, specifically through the eyes of local leaders. It mainly

explores the accountability system within Texas education, how and why the STAAR test has become a controversial topic, and how education could be restructured on a local level to best support students, teachers, and parents. To further the research, I conducted a qualitative study using personal interviews. This section will discuss the strategy and procedure used for collecting data with integrity.

Participants

I narrowed down the participant pool by determining some of the most important education stakeholders on the state and local level: teachers, administrators, parents, non-profit advocates, and policy makers. Students were not included in the participant pool due to their vulnerable nature. From my operating network, I reached out to people within each of these areas through email. Most participants resided in the Permian Basin area. Demographics such as education and race were not variables of this study. There were no interview questions that pried into the personal lives of the participants, and participants could choose to remain anonymous if desired. Participant 1: Tara Bradshaw, a former Texas teacher, consented to provide the teacher perspective. Participant 2: Terri Coleman, a former assistant principal, school counselor, and current State Assessments Supervisor for MISD, offered the administrator perspective. Participant 3 and 4: Sheri Doss, the Texas PTA President, and Leslie Boggs, the national PTA President, provided the perspective of parents and education advocates. Participant 5: Representative Brooks Landgraf contributed the legislator and state official perspective. Participant 6: This participant wished to remain anonymous, but they provided perspective through the non-profit lens.

Research Design

After agreeing to be interviewed and signing the consent form, participants were then scheduled for one interview session. Zoom video conferencing was used to conduct the interviews through personal computers. Each participant engaged in a maximum, 45-minute video interview in which they answered a series of questions. Each interview was recorded through Zoom and transcribed using Word. The participants answered between 5-8 questions, but the interview process was unstructured to allow participants freedom to provide depth in their answers. The questions inquired a full explanation of the participants' role within the education system. As the interview progressed, the questions became more focused on that particular role and area of knowledge. All questions were open-ended and required explanation.

Results

This section will reveal the findings from the interviews, relative to the questions posed from the archival research. Although not every participant was asked the same questions, there are a few overlapping questions that received more than one answer. This section will conclude with the common themes of the interviews.

How has the STAAR test directly impacted the classroom and students?

The underlying questions of this question were: By what measures does the STAAR test determine a student's preparedness for college or career after high school? How does a student's ability to pass or fail the STAAR test affect their future ability to pass or fail the assessment? How often or approximately how many hours are spent on preparation for the STAAR test? How does the STAAR test assist teachers in understanding student progress and growth?

Participant 1 began her explanation by discussing the pressure both students and teachers faced in preparing for the rigorous STAAR exam. Some of the challenges she experienced as a teacher were around the culturally limited vocabulary the STAAR exam would use. For some

students, this vocabulary was familiar, but for others, particularly low socioeconomic students, this vocabulary was foreign; however, teachers had no way of ensuring students were familiar with all cultural references used in the assessment. “Those things were... difficult to see how some kids had to try to assimilate into that...” Participant 1 specifically mentions fifth grade as a crucial testing year because it determines what track students will be placed in for junior high. “Instead of doing anything remedial [after fourth grade], they make them take and test, and in fifth grade, they have to pass.” Fifth grade increases the pressure on students, and it sets the expectation for that student for the rest of their schooling career. Additionally, the STAAR exam has added a level of angst among all students, even students in kindergarten through third grade. “So, K, first, and second have gotten used to STAAR testing: you can’t talk, you can’t play at recess, you can’t go to PE, nothing.” Participant 1 explained how this mentality around testing creates such fear and anxiety for students taking the test. Teachers are then responsible for building student’s testing confidence because as Participant 1 admitted, student’s confidence diminishes with every test failure to their name. In regard to classroom management and lesson planning, Participant 1 said that the STAAR test results help teachers group kids and create specific interventions. However, the test scores do reduce children to a number and often cause teachers major dilemmas due to the incentives created by the TEA. Participant 1 gives the example of a teacher who has to choose between dedicating more time to a group of students who could receive a “Masters” grade on the assessment versus a couple of students who have not progressed much throughout the year, have failed previous years, and seem to have a slim chance of passing this year. She then poses the question: “What do you do?” Due to the accountability system, teachers may be more incentivized to focus attention on the higher-level students and leave the other students to fend for themselves.

Participant 2 described the STAAR test as difficult due to some of the language and vocabulary that students are assumed to understand. “I don’t know if it’s because of our technology age... kids have the ability to get any kind of information, so I don’t know if we assume that they know more than they do.” Participant 2 argues that the readability and the development age of the students do not match up due to personal observation of students in MISD schools. “I just think we’re off target a little bit with this particular assessment.” However, Participant 2 points out that the STAAR test provides the district with “learning measures” based on students’ test data for places in need of intervention. However, the schools were left to determine how to best intervene with their students learning progress. Due to the high demands of academic progression in the forms of the STAAR tests, schools in MISD adopted the PLC (Professional Learning Communities) model to encourage collaboration among teachers in pursuing intervention methods. Although Participant 2 does not agree with the cliché of “teaching to the test,” she did admit that most teachers incorporate test preparation programs that reinforce the curriculum to prepare students for the end-of-year assessments. In response to how much time teachers spend on test preparation throughout the year, Participant 2 remarked, “teaching to the test, interacting with the curriculum, interacting with STAAR type questions, interacting with STAAR type strategies... I mean, all of these little strategies that we use during the test, I would say daily.”

Participant 5 argued that some of the problems in education stem from that fact that “we put all of our... education eggs into one basket, standardized testing.” The accountability system may have other factors that are factored in, but student performance on state assessments seems to overwhelm all other criteria. For Participant 5, this type of accountability system thrives on high-stakes testing. Students’ knowledge from the entire year is graded by one test at the end of

the year. “The reality of it lowers the expectations of our students... in that we basically reduce them to a standardized test.” Participant 5 discussed how the STAAR test influences teachers and schools to ignore students’ unique characteristics and experiences while limiting the learning process to reflect only information tested. Since the STAAR test has encouraged schools to focus more attention on testing and “college readiness,” Participant 5 believed that schools have neglected skilled work and career readiness programs. “We basically dared school districts to do away with those programs because why would any school district have the audacity to spend money on something that’s not going to be taken into their accountability ratings by the state.”

Participant 6 did not believe the STAAR test itself had affected education, but rather “I think that our reaction to it has affected education.” Instead of solely focusing attention on the STAAR, Participant 6 argued that quality instruction should prepare a student for the test. “I just think if you teach a child to not be a linear thinker, but one who can look at concepts and apply them appropriately to solve a problem, that’s what you need to do.” Rather than emphasizing the idea of “teaching to the test,” Participant 6 believed quality instruction that encourages critical-thinking is sufficient in preparing students for the assessment while avoiding the immense stress and anxiety of the test.

How has federal education reform, specifically NCLB and ESSA, affected education nationally and in Texas?

The underlying question was: How has federal government involvement changed education on a state level?

Participants 3 and 4 focused on how federal education reform affects school funding. In both reforms, funding is tied to assessments. Since funding is reliant on high test scores, the stakes for high performance on the STAAR are increased, and as a result, many of the students,

teachers, and parents are experiencing that stress. Federal reform emphasizes test scores as a means to measure accountability. “There needs to be accountability, and at this point, that’s all we’ve got.” Therefore, NCLB and ESSA set the standards for education by which states were obligated to follow. For Texas, these requirements are fulfilled through the STAAR test in order for Texas to be rewarded federal funding.

Participant 5 discussed several ways in which federal education reform affects education in Texas. Texas is required to not only have a state assessment, but to use that assessment in its accountability system; therefore, if Texas chooses to move away from these policies, it risks 10% in public education funding. Although Participant 5 believes education reform has good intentions, the implementation tends to have more negative consequences than benefits. Participant 5 argued that both federal and state governments are “so far removed from that relationship between a teacher and his or her students.” Education reform is a way for the government to dictate rules, regulations, and requirements while remaining distant and unattached to the classroom and the teacher-student relationship. “At a certain point, you have to say, ‘Okay school districts, you know what kind of students you have, you know what kind of teachers you have. We want to help give you the tools to make that work.’ Then spend more of our time and energy at the federal and state level as a resource...”

Where do the problems within education in Texas stem?

An underlying question to the question posed was: Who or what should be held accountable?

Participant 1 discussed how the accountability system is unfairly based upon a child and that child’s one test score at the end of the year. Accountability does not take into consideration the external factors that impair students to perform their best. “One of my student’s parents

passed away— what was I— what are we supposed to do?” Additionally, Participant 1 pointed out how the TEA groups kids by ethnicity for expected academic achievement percentages.

However, she considered this a problem because these percentages do not take into account the socioeconomic barriers that students within these groups face. Plus, kids are temperamental and have bad days, so “if they come in with a bad day on a STAAR test, I sure can’t change it.”

Participant 1 claimed that the STAAR test is unforgiving of students who do not perform well on that one testing day, and as a result, is unforgiving when grading the teacher based on the low-performance by students. So when asked where the problems within education in Texas stem, Participant 1 replied with, “... the problem [is] stemming from— your basing all of your credits on a child... we don’t do anything else in this world that is based on children, but for whatever reason, our testing and all of the way schools are graded are based on a child. That’s hard.”

Participants 3 and 4 emphasized the importance of partnership and collaboration between educators and parents. One challenge the PTA identified was parent participation in their child’s educational experience. Often, this lack of participation is because of a lack of know-how. Parents are not always given the tools and resources they need to be active in the schools and in their child’s learning process. Participants 3 and 4 argued that advocacy for students and teachers requires parents stepping up. “... it has been a struggle for so long to get our members to understand that the membership was their voice... it matters when I step up on the capital and am talking to the house Speaker... and I say ‘I’m Sheri Doss, President of Texas PTA and I represent over half a million members and this is what we want you to do for our kids,’ then they pay attention.” Parents need to be educated because their influence within the educational system is paramount. “Education has to start at home, but we have to show them how to do that otherwise no matter what happens in our committees... we would be back here again writing

another plan that didn't work." PTA pointed out the need for empowerment in the education system to help both parents, teachers, and students to have the right resources and knowledge to be successful. Additionally, Participant 3 highlighted the notion of equitable education and how a lack of equity poses a threat to real change within the education system. "The whole thing about equitable education is critical if you, in fact, are going to move forward as a state, in terms of education..."

Participant 6 believed a lot of people share responsibility for the challenges in education. Although parents are often blamed by the school system, Participant 6 referenced IDEA Public Schools as providing outstanding results while working in low-income communities. IDEA works with some of the most "at-risk" kids in Texas, so its success is not solely dependent on ideal external factors. Since IDEA is able to face the challenges within Texas education head-on and maintain effective schooling, Participant 6 is led to believe that "even though all of us have responsibility, ultimately it is a great responsibility in the school and the school system to be successful."

What would be an accurate and well-rounded evaluation of teachers, principals, and schools?

Based on participants' thoughts and opinions on the accountability system within education, they offered suggestions of how teachers, principals, and schools could be evaluated differently.

Participant 1 considered teacher growth as a more accurate evaluation of teachers and schools. Teacher growth could be measured using testing data by comparing year-to-year growth of a teacher's passing rate. Participant 1 gave the example of first-year teachers who are often chastised for low test scores during the first-year of teaching, but instead of grading

accountability based on those first-year pass/fail percentages, Participant 1 suggested that it should be based on the growth between the first and second year of teaching. Additionally, Participant 1 believed that principals' accountability should be based on their management skills and good school procedures. Overall, Participant 1 believed growth measures offer a better system for calculating accountability.

Participant 2 was first specifically asked whether or not STAAR test scores are a good measurement of teacher effectiveness by which she replied with, "I don't think it's a fair assessment." The STAAR test offers a "one day snapshot" into a student's life, and it does not take into account the external impediments that affected students learning or testing. Plus, students are likely to have bad days where they oversleep or did not get enough sleep, so their best ability could be altered. When asked what a fairer evaluation system of teachers would look like, Participant 2 responded with on-campus administrative reports and feedback. "I just think constant feedback, constant coaching— I mean, I think just a visual observation is the best way to determine whether a teacher is truly effective or not."

Participants 3 and 4 both offered suggestions of how to restructure evaluation processes. Participant 3 referred to the current accountability system as a "catch 22" because on one hand, the assessment provides the necessary measures to hold teachers accountable, yet it is also the source of all of the stress and pressure students and teachers experience. Although Participant 3 understood the purpose of the state assessments, she also remarked, "we've gotten away from what the real purpose of assessments are, and it is really to see where our kids are and where they need to be." In place of consequential incentives, Participant 3 recommended Texas use more positive rewards to incentivize teachers to remain effective and accountable. Right now, Participant 3 is aware of a shortage in qualified, passionate teachers due to an imbalanced

accountability system. Participant 4 expanded on this concern by revealing the vicious cycle of bad teachers that is perpetuated by the education system. “Being a business owner and being in business, you know if someone doesn’t perform, you should have a way to let them go instead of being pushed down the pipe to someone else.” Overall, both Participant 3 and 4 agreed there needs to be a reevaluation of the accountability system to ensure an improved evaluation process for teachers, principals, and schools.

Participant 5’s question was more related to how schools and teachers could be held accountable without the STAAR assessment scores as the focal point. To answer this, Participant 5 prefaced with “I 100 percent believe that we should have accountability for public schools.” He argued that accountability is needed for two fundamental reasons: 1) taxpayers should have some way to understand the return on their investment, 2) parents should have confidence that a public school is providing his or her child a good education. However, using a standardized test as the major measurement of this accountability is not favorable. Instead, Participant 5 suggested that accountability be measured by its ability to prepare all students for college, career/skilled work, or the military upon graduation. A school should provide the opportunity for all students to choose any of these three options when pursuing the next chapter of their lives.

What changes should be made to improve Texas education?

Each participant offered insight into some solutions they thought would benefit the education system both nationally and in Texas.

Participant 1 had a few ideas in effort to update the accountability system in education that focused on growth. Instead of relying on one end-of-year assessment, Participant 1 advocated for benchmark testing throughout the year to measure growth and to better student intervention. It would be beneficial to both students and teachers to have data from the

beginning, middle, and end of the year in order to see how students are progressing. This would also expose the areas in which different students struggle, allowing time for teachers to strategize thoughtful interventions before the STAAR test at the end of the year. Then, “instead of saying he passed the test, or he failed the test, let’s say you grew 50%.” Participant 5 concluded that growth as the focus may relieve the pressure from the STAAR tests and allow teachers to spend more time with directed instruction.

Participant 2 offered insight into how the TEA is progressing and updating its processes of testing and measuring accountability. By 2023, Texas plans to administer the state assessments virtually. Participant 2 said that the state has no intention to increase funding to help school districts accumulate the necessary technology or to build the infrastructure needed to administer an electronic test to all students in a two-week timeline. Regardless, Participant 2 is an advocate for increased technology integration in schools in order to prepare students for college or career after high school.

Participants 3 and 4 suggested more opportunities for family engagement in schools as well as increased collaboration between parents and teachers. Participant 3 participated in the creation of the Long-Range Plan for Public Education in efforts to improve access and equity across Texas. This plan will prioritize student and family engagement and empowerment as well as educator preparation, recruitment, and retention. Additionally, Participant 4 revealed how the federal government “leads the way for states to understand the importance of education” by investing in student’s education through federal funding. Lastly, both Participants 3 and 4 emphasized the continuation of parent education, especially during this technological era, in order to encourage families to actively engage in schools.

Participant 5 proposed that education reform should be focused on the teacher-student relationship. “Everything that [the student is] going to benefit from in those critical years between Kindergarten and twelfth grade are all going to take place in or around [the] classroom.” Instead of focusing resources on test preparation and assessments, Participant 5 believed that students would best benefit if federal and state resources were used to strengthen the classroom environment. Additionally, Participant 5 outlined an innovative way to measure students’ success after high school. The data would focus on how well-prepared students were for the real world (e.g. college, skilled work) one year after graduation and then five years after graduation. This could provide fresh information regarding college and career readiness in place of STAAR test results.

Participant 6 suggested communities invest in more alternative options for education, like Charter Schools. Additionally, in order for public education to progress, it needed to restore its focus on quality instruction. Participant 6 believed this could be renewed through improved teacher training similar to the professional development modeled by IDEA Public Schools.

Common Themes

The data gathered revealed a few common keywords mentioned throughout the participants’ interviews. These keywords are: accountability, growth, incentives, pressure, collaboration, and preparation.

Discussion

This section will discuss the five major questions from the analysis and connect the information gathered from the interviews to the archival research.

Research Questions

RQ 1: How has the STAAR test directly impacted the classroom and students?

Based on the information collected from the interviews, I identified three specific areas the STAAR test impacts the classroom and students: increased pressure due to high-stake testing; alteration of teachers' expectations and expectations of teachers; shift in schools' priorities.

The high-stakes nature of the STAAR assessment creates stress and pressure for both students and teachers. Test scores are tethered to funding due to the current accountability system in place; therefore, teachers are under a lot of stress to ensure their students pass the STAAR test. As mentioned in the literature review, teachers are tempted to rely on a "teaching to the test" mentality to ensure the students are equipped with the basic skills needed to do well on the test. Additionally, the STAAR test inadvertently creates an anxiety-ridden environment for students. Bradshaw mentioned that the entire school is essentially placed in a lockdown during STAAR testing to ensure a "controlled testing environment." Students in Kindergarten through third grade are not allowed to play at recess, eat lunch in the cafeteria, or attend P.E. because it would risk distracting students taking the test. Although a quiet test taking environment is vital, the school generates fear among students in the school, even before they are actually taking the test. On the other hand, Participant 6 argued that the STAAR test itself does not affect education, but rather the reactions to the test have resulted in an abundance of stress and anxiety. Instead of overreacting and allowing the test to have such an impact on the classroom, teachers should maintain their focus on providing students quality instruction to enable them to think critically, problem solve, and apply the knowledge they gained over the year. High-stakes testing has manipulated teachers into a panic in which they depend on scripted curricula and test preparation materials. Giroux (1985) exposed this manipulation through his explanation of neoliberal goals of managing and controlling teachers to provide "consistent and predictable" teaching across the

nation. Therefore, the pressure teachers feel is not merely self-induced, but it is influenced by the neoliberal nature of current education reform.

STAAR test results are used by teachers to group students and set expectations within the classroom. Although these test scores are often seen as a limited assessment of both students and teachers, they provide a baseline by which teachers can operate their classroom and students can have more directed instruction. Even so, this poses a threat to students because teachers are given set expectations to operate under. Bradshaw referenced how the TEA's expectations range between the different student groups. Teachers are made well aware of these expectations, and some may be unconsciously influenced into implementing similar standards within their classrooms. As a result, teachers may spend more time and effort working with students they expect to perform well or only devote necessary energy to fulfill the minimum percentages set by the state. Hursh (2007) points out that teachers are even encouraged by their supervisors to focus on the students who are nearly passing.

Lastly, the STAAR test has ultimately altered schools' priorities from providing an enriched learning experience for students to simply passing state assessments. Groen (2012) exposed how schools were more likely to increase Math and ELA instructional time while Hursh (2007) explained that a majority of schools' budgets have been dedicated to test preparation. Money talks, and when it comes to education, most of the money is invested in the state assessment and programs that benefit funding. Representative Landgraf claimed that the STAAR test has caused schools to favor test preparatory resources and programs because "why would any school district have the audacity to spend money on something that's not... taken into their accountability ratings." Schools prioritize improving test scores because according to the state,

high test scores equate with effective schooling; therefore, STAAR related practice, materials, and programs ensure quality instruction that is desired by the state.

RQ 2: How has federal education reform, specifically NCLB and ESSA, affected education nationally and in Texas?

This research revealed that federal education reform has shaped education both nationally and state-wide due to two central components: power and funding.

The history of education reform unveils its underlying intentions in expanding federal power in education. Both NCLB and ESSA mandated states abide by certain requirements while using consequences and incentives to gain compliance. The federal government used and continues to use data to expose “gaps” within the education system in order to maintain support for governmental intervention. The public is sold on the idea that education reform will provide change within the system to offer an improved and equitable education for all students. In fact, Common Core was introduced with a goal of reinforcing equity and setting common standards its predecessor failed to do. However, Representative Landgraf highlighted how even though education reform has good intentions, the ramifications outweigh the benefits. Consequently, federal education reform seems to only achieve its goal of maintaining power and influence in education while its good intentions remain as they are, intentions.

Both Boggs and Doss reinforce the necessity of educational funding from the federal and state level governments. However, as seen throughout this research, funding has strings attached. Doss recognized the need for accountability in education, but currently, state assessments are the only way to measure accountability. Subsequently, Texas schools are obligated to fulfill the requirements set by the state in order to secure funding. The funding piece is one of the most influential factors in how education operates because it forces schools, particularly low-income

schools, to be reliant on the government and vulnerable to coercion. Since federal and state governments are far removed from the classroom and the teacher-student relationship, most of the mandates implemented tend to be more destructive than they are constructive. Regardless, schools, and especially teachers, have little say in the standards, curriculum, and assessments due to requirements bound to funding.

RQ 3: Where do the problems within education in Texas stem?

Many people share responsibility for the challenges in education; however, there are internal systematic challenges that pose difficulties for each of the stakeholders. The analysis reported two categories that encompass the problems Texas education faces today: accountability and collaboration.

Many of the critiques of education in the U.S. stem from the accountability metrics. Education reform aims to hold teachers and schools accountable to effective teaching through national standards and state assessments. The problem with accountability does not reside in the idea but rather in the practice. In other words, as Bradshaw highlighted, the accountability system is based upon a child and how well that child performs on an end-of-year assessment. In addition, this test does not take into account the external factors that hinder a student's ability to perform well. The accountability system can be unforgiving due to its consequential framework. NCLB attached accountability to assessments and funding there by increasing the accountability metric, raising the stakes, and doubling down on the pressure experienced by teachers and schools. As a whole, the accountability system is limiting, unfair, and wrongfully evaluated.

Accountability in education typically targets teachers as the source of the problem. Instead, insight from the interviews shed light on a new source to be blamed, lack of collaboration. If there are multiple people who share responsibility within the education system,

then each of these people should be collaborating in order to problem solve and innovate for the betterment of education. The PTA works cross-sector to connect each of the stakeholders in pursuit of changing and improving education. One of the main relationships the PTA focuses on is the parent-teacher relationship due to its direct impact on a student's life. Parent involvement is essential in a student's educational experience, but there are often barriers obstructing their participation. Collaboration allows for parent education, advocacy, family engagement, and student empowerment. Doss argued that without collaboration and communal support, any exclusive reform presented and implemented would fail. As seen in the archival research, education reform tends to isolate individuals and force them to work in solitude under one centralized idea. As a result, Isolation is detrimental to the growth and advancement of education.

RQ 4: What would be an accurate and well-rounded evaluation of teachers, principals, and schools?

All of the participants agreed that some form of accountability in education is necessary, but they also agreed that it is in dire need of restructuring. Therefore, each of the suggestions for how teachers, principals, and schools could be better evaluated were centered around growth, feedback, and preparation.

Instead of basing a teacher's rating on the STAAR test scores of their students at the end of the year, teachers should be evaluated based on growth throughout the year as well as year to year comparative growth. One suggestion of how to measure this growth was through interim testing in the beginning, middle and end of the school year. Not only would this system be advantageous for the teacher but the students as well because it would allow for necessary interventions before the final cumulative exam. This could relieve teachers of the pressure to

“teach to the test” because they are able to gather data and knowledge regarding a student's progression before that student takes the STAAR exam. In addition, teacher growth could be assessed through their ability to enrich the curriculum using culturally relevant and inclusive materials in their lessons.

Alongside growth, the participants discussed the importance of feedback for the evaluation process. It is imperative that on-campus administration conduct regular sit-ins to provide teachers with feedback. Coleman pointed out how observations of teachers allow administrators to evaluate whether or not a teacher provides quality and effective instruction. In addition to feedback, school districts could offer positive rewards and incentives for teachers who exhibit growth. Growth could also take into account a teacher's attempts at collaborating with other teachers, connecting with parents, applying feedback, and tracking student data. A school should have high standards for its teachers, but it should also be equipped to provide the necessary support. The notion of feedback suggests that teacher accountability should be assessed on the local level rather than on a national scale.

Another way to assess teachers and schools is through the ability to prepare students for college or career after high school. Equity is more concerned with access and opportunity, so if education reform aims to measure equity, it should gauge preparedness in order to understand which students are granted the opportunity to pursue whatever they want upon graduation. Although the STAAR test claims to assess college readiness, there are doubts on whether or not the test can actually predict a student's ability to succeed in college.

RQ 5: What changes should be made to improve Texas education?

After assessing the current state of education, each participant offered ideas of how Texas education could improve: use of interim testing; integration of technology; increased family

engagement and parent education; emphasis on the student-teacher relationship and the classroom; more opportunities for alternative schooling.

Conclusion

Federal education reform has not only shaped the way in which people perceive the education system, but it has also produced and maintained the system of education that operates today. In response to a “crisis” in public education, the federal government assumed responsibility in establishing an equitable and promising education for all children. Although the intentions are admirable, the follow through is lacking. As a result, the education system has lost sight of its original goal thereby compromising its integrity and quality once promised. High-stakes testing, and unforgiving accountability have altered the nature of education within the nation and more specifically, within Texas. The title of this thesis asks a very important question: Where did education in Texas go wrong? Based on the information and data collected, there are three key groups that answer this question: accountability, assessment, and collaboration.

The STAAR test affects the classroom in many different ways both consciously and unconsciously. It is difficult for teachers and schools to not participate in test preparatory behaviors due to the demanding nature of the assessment and high-stakes accountability. While accountability is imperative, the system currently in place does more harm than good. Additionally, assessments are beneficial to the learning process by testing one’s knowledge and assessing where the student resides with the information; however, the immense pressure created through the accountability system diminishes the original purpose of the assessment, as a supportive tool in education, not the focal point. Lastly, accountability has altered how people within the world of education work together. Instead of promoting collaboration, the strict mandates and harsh consequences isolate the individual. Collaboration among parents, students,

teachers, administration, policy makers, and advocates is vital in creating a successful education system.

To conclude, I will propose a few solutions. The accountability system needs to be restructured in order to reinstate local power in education. Then, school districts should implement professional development and performance-based feedback opportunities for teachers with support from the state. Additionally, local governments would be responsible for holding teachers accountable using growth as the measurement. Although disliked by many, the STAAR test could remain as a standardized assessment used *only* to evaluate student progression. In tandem with the STAAR test, Texas should provide interim testing throughout the year to help school districts measure growth and plan interventions. Lastly, collaboration should be a priority in Texas education. The Board of Education, Texas Education Agency, Parent Teacher Association, alongside policy makers, legislators, and government officials should work as supporting roles to the teacher, student, and classroom. Education needs to be decentralized, and the community needs to step up, work cross-sector, and collaborate in order to promote real change within the education system.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Recruitment Email

April 2020

Hello _____,

I hope this message finds you well. I know the adjustments to life in quarantine have been stressful, so I want to thank you for your time and consideration in participating in the research for my thesis.

So, to introduce my thesis:

My mom has always told me that if I was going to complain, then I had to do something about it. My complaints and frustration with education quickly became a passion that I have pursued throughout my years in school. With the incredible opportunities to conduct research at the University of Texas, I decided to write a thesis on Texas education, specifically focusing on the STAAR test.

I have investigated many existing knowledges to create a foundation of understanding of the history, motives and implications of standardized tests and education reforms. From this research I have located holes where questions have arisen but not been answered. This is where you come in. Being the _____, you have important insight on _____. With your help, I hope to learn more about _____ as well as proposed solutions to some of the current challenges that face Texas education today.

I understand this topic tends to be a controversial subject, but I hope to gain a diverse set of perspectives on Texas education, education reform, standardized testing, and accountability.

Would you like to participate in a 30-45-minute interview regarding your position within the world of education and your opinion of Texas education and the STAAR test?

Of course, the interview will be conducted via Zoom due to quarantine, so I would like to emphasize that there are **no** health risks involved in participating.

If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to me. I am able to hop on a phone call to clarify any of the details. **Below I have attached a consent form that outlines the risks, benefits, processes, and implications of your participation in the research.** Please read through it, and if there are any questions or concerns that arise, let me know. If you agree to interview, then sign the form at the bottom and return it to me.

Again, I deeply appreciate your time and consideration, and I hope to work with you soon.

I look forward to hearing from you,
Rebecca McCraney

Appendix B: Consent Form



UT Austin IRB Approved
 Protocol Number: 2020-02-0079
 Approved: 04/09/2020

Title of the Project: Where Did Education in Texas Go Wrong? A Qualitative Analysis of How Standardized Testing Affects the Quality of Education

Principal Investigator: Rebecca McCraney, student

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jones Barbour, professor

Consent to Participate in Research

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to be part of a research study. This consent form will help you choose whether or not to participate in the study. Feel free to ask if anything is not clear in this consent form.

Important Information about this Research Study

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to analyze how standardized tests in Texas affect the quality of education as seen through different roles in the education system (e.g. student, parent, teacher, administrations, policy maker).
- If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in a 30-45-minute interview, which will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher.
- There are no foreseeable risks stemming from this research.
- The possible benefits of this study include understanding and exploring the implications of current education reform and testing in Texas.
- Taking part in this research study is voluntary. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time.
- Your decision to participate in this study will not affect your relationship with UT Austin

More detailed information may be described later in this form.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research study.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is to analyze how standardized tests and education reform have affected education in Texas. The point of the interviews is to explore the different roles (i.e. teacher, administration, parent, legislator) that participate in these reforms and/or are directly affected by

them. This study is focused primarily on qualitative research to investigate the general attitude towards Texas education and education reform.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 30-45-minute interview, which will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The interview will be conducted via Zoom (video chat). You may choose whether or not you would like your name and occupation included in the thesis. No other personal information will be requested nor disclosed by the researcher.

What risks and discomforts might you experience from being in this study?

There are no foreseeable risks stemming from this research.

How could you benefit from this study?

While you may not benefit monetarily or physically by participating in this study, you may benefit intrinsically. You will be able to contribute to the larger conversation of how we can better education in Texas. Your insight will help myself as well as many others understand the impacts of standardized testing and education reform on the past, present, and future state of education.

How will we protect your information?

As stated above, you may choose whether or not they would like their name and occupation included in the thesis. No other personal information will be requested nor disclosed by the researcher.

What will happen to the information we collect about you after the study is over?

We will email you the interview transcription. We will not keep the interview transcription nor the recorded interview after the thesis is completed.

How will we compensate you for being part of the study?

You will not receive any type of payment for your participation.

Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary

It is up to you to decide to be a part of this study. Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no effect on your personal and/or professional role within the education system. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, any transcription or recording collected during the interview will be destroyed.

Contact Information for the Study Team

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact:

Rebecca McCraney
432-260-4637
rebcmcc@utexas.edu

Or

Dr. Jones Barbour
jonesbarbour@utexas.edu

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board
Phone: 512-232-1543
Email: irb@austin.utexas.edu

Please reference study number

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. We will give you a copy of this document for your records. We will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about, and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature

Date